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What Motivates Turkish Undergraduate Students to Attend International Student Mobility Programs and Study Abroad: Insights from a University

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Abstract

A better understanding of the students' reasons for studying abroad can provide valuable insights into the situation and help both sending and host parties to tailor their programs accordingly. In this study, we investigated the primary reasons the undergraduate students in a medium-sized state university in Turkey cited as important in their intention to study abroad within the Erasmus Student Exchange Program. A qualitative approach was employed in order to allow students to express their reasons freely and without restrictions. The study was conducted in a medium-sized state university in Turkey. The participants were 170 undergraduate students (sophomores, juniors and seniors) from various departments (business management, engineering, art and humanities). Data gathered from student writings was analyzed through the use of thematic analysis. The findings of the study indicate that Turkish students have different reasons to participate in student exchange programs and study abroad. From detailed analysis of the data, five main themes were identified. These are given as 1) language learning, 2) personal growth, 3) leisure, 4) academic considerations, and 5) career opportunities.

Keywords: Reasons for studying abroad; Erasmus exchange program; Turkish students; student mobility.

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1. Introduction

Contrary to more national nature of education till the end of twentieth century, educational systems have adopted a more international approach due to the effects of globalization; and internationalization of higher education has actually become a major policy of governments in many countries [1]. Reflective of this shift from local to international in education, international education and exchange programs are being more and more popular among students all over the world. Turkish students, especially for those in higher education in Turkey, similarly would like to benefit from exchange programs. The statistics shows a growing interest by university students in Turkey to attend Erasmus Student Exchange Program and study abroad for a specific time period as a part of their overall university education [2]. This is also in line with the global trend. Exchange students make up an important and increasing proportion of international students [3]. Therefore, it may help both students and administrators responsible for exchange programs in higher education institutions in Turkey understand the students' basic motivations and expectations regarding international education. This study, in that sense, aims to explore the reasons the students in a specific university in Turkey cited as important in their intention to attend exchange programs.

Mobility provided by exchange programs aims to form a society where tolerance and openness are valued. One of the main goals of mobility is to present the students with new opportunities by creating an environment that allows for interaction among people from different cultures. In the literature, certain benefits of participating in exchange programs are given. Some of them are more career and recruitment opportunities [4] and social opportunities as cultural tolerance, increased self-confidence and self-esteem [5]. There are also studies both in national and international literature that evaluate the Erasmus student exchange program in terms of its effectiveness, student satisfaction and benefits [6, 7].

A better understanding of the students' reasons for studying abroad can provide valuable insights into the situation and help both sending and host parties to tailor their programs accordingly. In this study, we wanted to investigate the primary reasons the undergraduate students in a medium-sized state university in Turkey cited as important in their intention to study abroad within the Erasmus Student Exchange Program. Therefore, our research question is formulated as follows:

- What are the primary reason/reasons to participate in Erasmus exchange program for university students in the study?

2. Materials and methods

Qualitative case study approach was employed in this study. Data was collected through open-ended questionnaire in order to allow students to express their reasons freely and without restrictions.

2.1. The Setting and participants of the study

The study was conducted in a medium-sized state university in Turkey. The participants were 170 undergraduate students (sophomores, juniors and seniors) from various departments (business management,

engineering, art and humanities). We purposefully included those who had applied for the Erasmus student mobility program so that only those who were already motivated to and showed willingness to study abroad. Based on the budget allocated for each university in an academic year, the university sets the criteria for student application to the program. Those who would like to participate in the program apply to the university and a language proficiency test is given. Based on their results in the language test and other criteria (GPA, interview, choice of the host country, departmental quota), those who achieve the highest grades are listed as potential candidates for the program and can benefit from the funding. In the process, we collected the data from those students who took the language (English) proficiency test. By doing this, we reached a great many students and this allowed us to collect data that is reflective of the whole population.

2.2. Data collection

The data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire. In fact, we asked only one question to the participants: "Could you please state the main reasons why you would like to participate in the program and study abroad?". Students were given as much time as they needed to elaborate their answers. All personal identifiers were removed to preserve anonymity and the participants were given a personal identifier number (S1 to S170).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data gathered from student writings was analyzed through the use of thematic analysis. All researchers first read all essays individually to familiarize with data and grasp a general understanding of the students' reasons to join student mobility and exchange programs. Then, each researcher developed their own codes and categories and provided student responses to justify and explain the source of their codes and categories. Upon individual assessments, the researchers met to discuss, compare and understand individual findings. This was followed by three more periodical meetings. After comparison of individual analysis and discussion sections four times, we reached consensus upon emerging and ultimate themes and their contents.

3. Results

The findings of the study indicate that Turkish students have different reasons to participate in student exchange programs and study abroad. From detailed analysis of the data, five main themes were identified. These are given as 1) language learning, 2) personal growth, 3) leisure, 4) academic considerations and 5) career opportunities. Each theme is explained and detailed below under separate sub-headings.

3.1. Language learning

76 out of 170 students in the study reported that the main reason why they would like to benefit from exchange program was learning or improving at least one language (preferably English). Language learning considerations were also evident in the majority of student writings. In total, 125 students specified language learning a strong motivation in their intention to go and study abroad as the main or secondary reasons. This is an interesting finding as these students were to pass the English Proficiency Exam in order to have a valid

application to the program. In our study group, all students had attended one academic-year long English preparatory class upon their enrollment to the university and received an acceptable grade to go on education in their departments. In other words, these students had already proved that they knew English and had the self-confidence to take another English test. However, the findings of the study suggested that language learning was the most-frequently given reason to attend the program.

The main reason for me to attend the program is to improve my English. (S28)

Our careful analysis of the data revealed some crucial key elements that explain this situation. First of all, most of the participants in the study believed that they know some English but they don't see themselves as proficient in the language. They stated that the previous language education that they took in prep school provided them with the opportunity to communicate in social settings, write an essay on a general topic and follow their classes in English. However, they made it clear that both for academic considerations and future career prospects, they need to gain some kind of fluency in the target language. They often stated that studying abroad for even a single term would provide an environment where they have the chance to practice the language all the time, communicate in real setting and expose to the language all the time.

In my country, I think language education is problematic. I don't trust my skills. The moment you go out of the class, then it is impossible to practice the language. Not all my courses are delivered in English so it is a disadvantage. The program is great because it gives us the chance to practice the language. (S93)

English is not just about asking the weather, understanding subtitles of your favorite TV show or writing about your country. I know that I need it both in my future academic life and professional life. I have to be able to use my language skills to write about a lab experiment or make a presentation to my future boss in English. For now, I don't trust myself. But the program will give me six months to practice English. It may not be enough to meet my expectations but that will be definitely better than spending six months here. (S120)

Secondly, those who chose a country where languages other than English are spoken often stated that their future plans necessitate learning these languages as well as English. As their previous experiences related to language learning attempts did not yield positive outcomes, they saw the program as the most viable way to achieve their goals regarding language learning. Finally, the findings indicate a common perception.

I want to go to German and learn German. In high school, we had German classes. Four years German but my level is elementary. I study Genetics here and Germany has the leading country in my field. So, I have to learn it. This is the only reason why I want to go there. (S62)

Most students believe that language learning is quite a troublesome process in their host country. Not having the options to practice the language in social settings is given the primary reason that limits their success in language learning. Being aware of international job prospects, global education and department-specific needs, not being proficient in at least one language is seen a barrier and exchange program are perceived as an immediate savior.

3.2. Personal growth

The second most cited reason to attend the program was that it offers unique personal growth opportunities. Students often regard the program as an opportunity to learn about other cultures, gain experience in a very different cultural context and learn to live in a multicultural environment. Culture learning here is the key sub-theme. Contrary to their host country where the mainstream is believed to adopt a particular culture, other countries, especially European countries, were reported to offer a more multicultural environment. The students often stated how curious they are about this new experience.

It is so fascinating to experience and feel a totally different culture...I will learn to communicate with these people... learn to live in another country. (S15)

Another personal growth opportunity was given as overcoming the challenges. The challenges most commonly referred to by the participants were adaptation, living alone and financial control. Though there were few participants that wrote about their fears about the potential challenges such as arranging accommodation, finding friends and adapt to a totally unknown culture, most were quite confident and stated that the program would teach them really useful social skills. For most of the participants, the program serves as the first abroad experience. Therefore, they stated that they had never had the opportunity to benefit from such an experience. The program, in that sense, is expected to be very useful. More than 100 participants stated that if they go abroad via the program, they will return to the country as more powerful, more self-confident and intellectual individuals.

For me, the program is especially important for individual development. I mean I will face certain challenges. I will learn how to survive in a different society, improve my social skills and learn to live by my own. All this experience will make me more self-confident. (S148)

I think after this experience, I will be another person. So far, I have only been able to read only one page of humanity. I know the things, way of life, beliefs etc. in my country but with the program, if I am accepted, I will have a look at the other pages. (S11)

3.3. Academic considerations

Academic consideration theme refers to the advantages that the program offers. Here, there were a really small number of students that indicated that the exchange program would benefit them in their university education. These students gave the academic advantages such as getting a particular course in their majors, attending classes in a university that has a reputation in a given field of study, professional and academic advances that the academic staff or scientists in that university pioneers, and using labs and conducting experiments. The students that specified academic considerations as their primary reason to attend the program differed from others in that they were quite knowledgeable about the universities/countries that they would like to go. The findings indicate that these students made extensive research about the universities and the departments. Instead of other students that provided a general overview of their reasons, this group of students referred to very specific and detail justification of their reasons. That is, they made it very clear that they wanted to go to a specific

country/university while others stated that they valued the experience of studying/living abroad.

I will join the program only if I am sent to University. Because I made a lot of research about it and learnt that they had great projects in my field. This university has the most successful professors in the field and taking courses from them will help me learn more about my major. (S74)

3.4. Leisure

This theme is quite interesting as a great many students (68 out of 170) see the program as a great vacation opportunity. Leisure is the key word here as these students often reported that having fun is their primary motivation to attend the program. Socializing, trying local food, enjoying the architecture, festivals and other social events, travelling to neighboring countries were seen as the most important advantages of the program. Some participants even defined the program as 'a very long vacation in which you are also given a grant'.

Who doesn't want such a nice experience? I will make friends, enjoy the restaurants and coffee in Italy. I will visit major tourist attractions. (S44)

While leisure was often stated as a secondary or tertiary advantage of the program by other students, those who stated that leisure was their main goal seldom gave another reason to participate in the program. These students made it very clear that they enjoyed the experience of living abroad not studying abroad.

Like many other students in my country, Erasmus is always the dream of mine. I have never been abroad before and I don't think most of us have. Erasmus will give us this opportunity. I don't really care about classes or lessons. All I want to go there and enjoy my very long vacation. (S81)

3.5. Career opportunities

Our last theme was career opportunities. Almost one third of all students stated that studying abroad for one or two terms will help them find better jobs when they graduate. Though they often didn't specify the connection between studying abroad for a short period of time and finding better jobs, the participant responses reveal a fundamental underlying thinking. These students believe that a foreign university name will make their CVs better. Most of them stated that leading companies tend to hire people that go to universities abroad and the program will enable them to impress the human resources management of the companies. These students also stated that their future income would also increase though they didn't present any concrete evidence justifying their assumptions.

It would be nice to tell that I studied architecture in a university in Spain during a job interview. I think they will be impressed to hear that. (S53)

Studying abroad means more income when you graduate. (S155)

Contrary to the majority that didn't specify what explicit career opportunities would be available for them, there

were also ones (though limited to 15 students) who explained the relation between program participation and career. They reported that studying abroad even for a very short time will help them be aware of more career paths. Instead of only focusing on local or national jobs available, the program is believed to widen their horizons and realize global job opportunities. A second justification is that the participants believe that they will make professional connections with academicians and other exchange students while they are abroad. These connections, then, are believed to inform them and help find jobs in other countries.

4. Discussion

This study aimed at exploring the reasons why undergraduate students in a university in Turkey would like to attend student exchange programs. Our findings indicated five major factors that interplayed with students' intention to study abroad. These are language learning and development opportunities, personal growth, academic opportunities, leisure and future career prospects.

Due to students' previous negative experiences with language learning in their country and their self-assessment of language skills as not sufficient to meet their expectations, language learning was given the most common reason for studying abroad. Though it is certain that the program serves as a fertile ground for more practice, research in the literature suggest that language also serves as a barrier for both those who attend Erasmus program and those who opt for not participating in the program [8, 9]. Students' fluency can improve significantly upon their arrival; they may be more self-confident and self-efficient in the target language [10] but it is also noteworthy to state that language shouldn't be the main motivating factor to apply for exchange programs. In that sense, it is crucial that students who are willing to benefit from the program have foreign language skills in advance. In other words, our findings indicate that most students in our study group regard the program more like a language course abroad. Lack of foreign language skills may also be serving as a deterrent for other students. Therefore the findings of the study regarding the student expectation from the program in language learning sense may have valuable implications for both those responsible for student mobility programs at higher education institutions and specialists in foreign language teaching field.

Considering personal growth, these students believe that studying abroad will benefit them a lot. Research indicate that study abroad programs benefit students in that it provides an increased understanding of global issues and cross-cultural skills [11, 12]. Studying abroad also contributes a lot to students' global citizen identity [13]. Considering the main objectives of the Erasmus exchange program, Turkish students' expectation from the program in the cultural sense can be met. It would be beneficial to encourage students to attend such programs in the future. It can help raise awareness to multiculturalism, cultural respect and empathy in the society in general.

For academic opportunities, the findings indicate that most students were not much interested in academic benefits of the program. The small number of students in the study who gave academic advantages as primary reason can prove that. Other research studying Turkish students' opinions about their Erasmus experience also indicate that academic benefits of the program are often seen secondary [13, 6]. However, academic advantages of the program should be better communicated to the students so that they can make more sensible decisions as

to what/where they are going to study. It is also crucial for the sustainability of the program.

Turkish students also would like to study abroad as they think it will help them find better career opportunities. However, most of the participants in the study didn't provide any solid justification. Though studying abroad even for a short period of time can help students realize potential career possibilities globally, there is still a need for further research that investigates whether there is a significant relationship between studying abroad and better career opportunities. This being the case, however, encouraging students to participate more in study abroad programs can help them think globally. Other potential benefits in the areas of personal growth, language fluency, academic learning and cultural awareness may indeed help build better career opportunities.

Finally, leisure was given by the some of the participants as their main goal to study abroad. We believe leisure, as being the primary reason for joining a higher education level exchange program, doesn't alone match with the objectives of the program. Therefore, it is important for both students and institutions to convey the objectives of the program better.

5. Conclusion

The study provides modest insights into the reasons why Turkish students would like to participate in student exchange and mobility programs. Considering the findings of the study, it can mainly be useful for those academics and exchange program coordinators to understand what students expect from study-abroad programs. Our findings are limited to the participants and context in the study. In this study, we identified the main factors that are relevant to students' motivation to attend student exchange and mobility programs. However, our findings do not address the underlying elements such as student background and language proficiency that might be influential in students' reasons. Further research is needed to understand the general trends in students' motivation to study abroad in Turkey and other countries. It is also recommended that cross-cultural research that seek for commonalities or differences in students' reasons to participate in such programs and study abroad are conducted so that a general framework can be defined. This can be achieved by studies that compare students from different countries. This and future studies in the subject can help policy-makers and institutions better identify students' needs and motives and plan programs accordingly.

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